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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an example of how to apply action research to improve English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL)/English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing instruction. This research was conducted over a 5-year period while the researcher taught 9 semester-long sections of advanced EFL writing to Taiwanese undergraduates. Using Reid's (1987) Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire and the researcher's own open-ended surveys, information was systematically analyzed and gathered about students' learning style preferences. The underlying goal of the study was to understand the relationship between learning styles and EFL/ESL writing, and to subsequently understand the students and better discern what approaches would both accommodate and challenge them. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator with its four Jungian categories of types (extroversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, judging-perceiving) was used. It was found that students were generally hostile to any writing instruction because their primary goal in learning English was to learn to talk to foreigners, not to write to them. It is concluded that teachers should first try to explore systematically the learning style preferences of their students before beginning to teach. (Contains 38 references.) (KFT)

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Action Research, Learning Styles, and EFL/ESL Writing

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This paper offers an example of how to apply action research to improve EFL/ESL writing instruction. I conducted the action research over a 5-year period while teaching 9 semester-long sections of advanced EFL writing to a total of 166 undergraduate English majors at National Tsinghua University. Using Reid's (1987) Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire and my own open-ended surveys, I systematically gathered and analyzed information from the students about their learning style preferences and their opinions of the course.

Results from the study helped me to understand better the learning needs of the students and to develop tasks that would both accommodate and challenge them. Based on the findings from the action research study, the paper offers some practical suggestions for other EFL/ESL writing teachers about how to accommodate the learning styles of their writing students.

Introduction

When I began teaching EFL writing at National Tsinghua University (NTHU) of Taiwan a few years ago, I quickly discovered that at least in the first section I was assigned, the English writing courses for sophomore and junior English majors were unpopular. Several students were convinced that taking an English writng course would be an unpleasant experience, a waste of time.

On the first day of class, I asked my students to write a couple of paragraphs indentifying for me what they wanted to learn. Much to my dismay, about half of the 21 students appeared to be apathetic or hostile to the course. In private conversations with me, they described the situation in very descriptive, often physical terms:

Most of us want to study foreign languages because we want to be able to talk with foreigners. In writing class, we sit and work by ourselves alone.

Writing class is boring. Who likes teachers just lecturing or reading out of a textbook?

I need to get up and move around, talking to others. Working in groups is good. But you can't do that in writing.

As these comments suggest, the students were reluctant to take writing classes. At least some appeared to think that their needs as learners were not being adequately accommodated. It was at this point that I became determined to study the relationship between learning styles and EFL/ESL writing.

Literature Review

What is a learning style? Ellis (1994) claims that the concept of learning style is "ill-defined, apparently overlapping with individual differences of both an affective and a cognitive nature" (p. 508). Others are more confident in proposing a definition. According to Reid (1995), the term "refers to an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills" (p. viii). As Willing (1988) points out, individual differences in learning styles may be attributed to cognitive, emotional, and sensory factors.

Many researchers now distinguish between the terms *learning strategies* and *learning styles*. Learning strategies are generally recognized as mental and physical steps taken by a learner to understand, store, and recall appropriate information (Bialystock, 1985; Chamot & Kupper, 1989; O'Malley et. al., 1985; Rigney, 1978). Oxford (1990) has identified 62 specific strategies arranged under the rubric of 19 strategy groups. One's choice of learning strategies is influenced by several factors, including a strong influence from one's general learning style (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Ely, 1989; Oxford, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

Learning styles are probably very important to language teaching and learning. Several studies have claimed that there is a relationship between field dependence-independence and language learning (Abraham, 1983, 1985; Carter, 1988; Chapelle & Roberts, 1986; Ellis, 1989; Stansfield & Hansen, 1983). More recently, language learning style researchers have tended to focus on exploring the relationships among the four Jungian dimensions of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) of Extraversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, and Judging-Perceiving (Ehrman & Oxford, 1988, 1990, 1995; Moody, 1988). Researchers have found flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity to be another important language learning style (Chapell & Roberts, 1986; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Ely, 1989). In addition, researchers have reported evidence about the influence of perception on language learning, especially the Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire's rubrics of Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, Tactile, Group, and Individual learning (Melton, 1990; Reid, 1987).

There are several instruments that attempt to identify aspects of learning styles with potential application in the writing classroom. Some of the more popular would include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which purports to identify one's general psychological type based upon preferred use of perception and judgment (Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Jensen & DiTiberio, 1989). Jung's model of personality has four bipolar dimensions of Extroversion-Introversion, Sensory Perception-Intuitive Perception, Thinking Judgment-Feeling Judgment, and Judging-Perceiving. The MBTI measures the amount of relative emphasis an individual places on each aspect of these dimensions. As a result, the MBTI may identify up to 16 possible psychological types, each having potential implications for learning.

The 100-item Learning Style Inventory of Dunn, Dunn & Price (1975) attempts to identify a wide range of environmental, emotional, sociological, and physical learning style preferences. Dunn & Dunn (1978) maintain that Environmental Factors (sound, light, temperature, room design) Emotional Factors (individual work, pair work, team work) and Physical Factors (perceptual preferences, intake of food and drink, time of day, and mobility) are aspects of one's learning style.

The Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) was developed and normed by Reid (1987, 1990, 1993, 1995) to identify basic physical and social learning style preferences among ESL students. Influenced by the earlier work on US school children of the Dunns and others (Dunn & Dunn, 1978; Dunn, Dunn & Price, 1975), it attempts to identify perceptual preferences for six learning styles: Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, Tactile, Group, and Individual. To my knowledge, it was the first published learning style measurement tool specifically developed for and normed on an ESL student population.

Some researchers have begun to explore how consideration of student learning styles could improve the teaching of writing. L1 researchers have found mixed but promising results. Cole (1990) found little evidence that matching instruction with learning style preferences of students would result in better student writing, improved self-perceptions as writers, or reduced apprehension. However, when DeBello (1985) administered the Learning Style Inventory of Dunn, Dunn & Price (1975), he found evidence that students performed better as writers and had a better attitude toward a writing task when their sociological learning style preferences (peer learning, learning with an adult, or learning alone) were matched with appropriate classroom activities.

L1 researchers have suggested that the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator may help L1 writing teachers to understand better the writing processes and instructional needs of students. In their landmark book, Jensen & DiTiberio (1989) suggest that personality differences between writing teachers and students may impede the effective teaching of writing, as in the case of a highly sensitive, empathetic Feeling instructor who might withhold strong criticism of a Thinking student's paper, even though the Thinking student would probably welcome such criticism (p. 138). There is some evidence suggesting that the kinds of comments and grades written on essays may be attributed to the personalities of teachers. Thompson (1991) examined teacher comments on essays, finding connections between teacher personality type, as reported on the MBTI, and teacher responding styles. In a related study involving the MBTI, Thompson (1992) reported discovering a connection between MBTI personality type and the kinds of advice offered on how to improve papers. Walter (1984) found that students who had MBTI personality types similar to their instructors tended to receive higher grades.

How to apply effectively learning styles research to the teaching of L2 composition is a developing field. Along with the L1 studies by Jensen & DiTiberio and others, studies reported by Carrell & Monroe (1993, 1995) applied the MBTI in an investigation of ESL, basic NES, and regular NES freshman writers. Carrell & Monroe discovered that over half of the ESL writers tended to fall within 2 of 16 personality types, and that there were correlations for the ESL students between personality types and features of their writing. ESL writers identified by the MBTI as Intuitive, Feeling, and Perceiving generally had "greater lexical diversity in their writing" (1995, p. 155). ESL writers identified by the

MBTI to be strong in the Thinking scale tended to do well with holistic ratings of writing and linguistic measurements of composition length and syntactic complexity.

Clearly there is plenty of room for more published studies to determine what, if any, relationships there might be between EFL/ESL writing and learning styles. More practical information based on classroom research might also be helpful about how to apply knowledge of learning styles to improve EFL/ESL writing instruction.

Research Methodology

To improve the quality of my teaching in writing classes, I decided to (1) gather more information that would help to identify students' expectations of my writing classes, (2) develop instructional strategies that would improve the quality of writing instruction for students, (3) implement student written assessments of my writing classes at the end of the semester that would help to pinpoint areas needing correction or change, and (4) share with other EFL/ESL writing teachers any findings that might be helpful.

I conducted action research over a 5-year period while teaching 9 semester-long sections of advanced EFL writing to a total of 166 undergraduate English majors at NTHU. The sections of this advanced course, which met 2 hours per week for 16 weeks, were a graduation requirement emphasizing the development of research paper writing skills.

What is *action research*? As McNiff (1988) points out, it is systematic enquiry conducted by teachers in real classroom situations about how to take specific steps to improve their own teaching. It is unlike traditional educational research, in which researchers generally assume the roles of outsiders who attempt to explore other people's circumstances objectively. Rather, the action researcher is an active participant who

consults with colleagues and students as partners about the research project throughout the research process to learn as much as possible about the students to provide for their learning needs.

Although at first glance the local topics investigated by action researchers may appear to lack generalizability, the solutions and context-based theories that result from it may still be of great value to others who encounter similar classroom challenges. Hence, action research is also systematic enqiry made public. Explains NcNiff (1988):

> An action researcher does not see herself as a "sample." She has made a decision to understand the world from her own point of view as an individual claiming originality and exercising her own judgment, intending her understandings to be used by others if they wish. (p. 124)

To determine the expectations of students about the course as well as their learning style preferences, I administered learning style preference surveys, including Reid's (1987) PLSPQ, and my own open-ended pre-course surveys. In the open-ended pre-course surveys, I asked the students during the first day of class to write answers to these questions: (1) What would you like to learn in this class? (2) What can I as the instructor do to help you to achieve your goals? In the open-ended post-course surveys, I asked the students during the last day of class to write answers to these questions: (1) What did you learn about writing in this class? (2) Which activities were most helpful to you? (3) Which activities were least helpful? (4) What might I have done better to help you to improve?

To promote honesty of reporting, I advised students not to identify themselves on any of the pre-course or post-course open-ended surveys. I used the open-ended format because, as Nunan (1992) points out, it can generate valuable information by giving respondents an opportunity to express their ideas directly using their own words.

To quantify for analysis the written responses to each question of the open-ended surveys, I applied a process based on what Lincoln & Guba (1985) refer to as unitizing qualitative data using the constant-comparison method. I identified in each written statement by the students the smallest unit of meaning relevant to the context of this study, "something that can stand by itself, that is, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 345). These units could be of any length: phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. More often they were pairs of sentences focusing on a common topic. Having identified units, I then wrote each one on an index card, and the cards with units were grouped into larger categories according to their shared contents. Once all of the units were grouped into larger categories, I counted the frequency of units for each category.

Because many of my students appeared to have disliked their previous experiences in writing classes, I wanted to learn more about their specific learning style needs. Near the beginning of each term I administered to all of my classes Reid's (1987) PLSPQ. I selected this self-report survey because its assessment of perceptual categories of learning styles—Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, Tactile, Group, and Individual—appeared to reflect the concerns about which my students had told me beginning in the very first semester at NTHU. In writing class, they expressed opinions about *doing* things: to move around, to go places, to work with their hands, to share in groups.

I also felt comfortable using Reid's (1987) PLSPQ because it was constructed and validated specifically for measuring the perceptual learning style preferences of adult non-native speakers of English (Reid, 1987; Reid, 1990). Later, Reid applied it in her own published study of the perceptual learning styles of 1,234 ESL students attending 43

intensive English language programs in the US. Reid's instrument has also been applied in a published study by Melton (1990) of Chinese EFL students.

Finally, I chose to use the PLSPQ because its developer has also suggested its use as a tool to improve the teaching of ESL writing (Reid, 1993). Applying this instrument in my action research study of how to improve the teaching of writing seemed appropriate.

Course Development

Identification of Perceptual Learning Styles

As Table 1 suggests, the data I collected from Reid's (1987) PLSPQ indicated that my students generally had 3 major learning styles (Kinesthetic, Tactile, Group), 2 minor learning styles (Visual, Auditory) and 1 negative style (Individual). The results generally complemented Melton's (1990) findings for EFL students in the People's Republic of China; however, my results were different from both Melton's (1990) and Reid's (1987) in two respects. Whereas Reid and Melton reported Group learning as a negative style preference, my students generally reported it as a major one. Furthermore, Reid and Melton claimed that Chinese students may perceive Individual learning to be a minor or major learning style, but mine generally reported it as a negative style.

Table 1

Means of Chinese Perceptual Learning Style Preferences in 3 Studies

Studies	Preferences					
	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Group	Individual
Reid (1987)	13.55	14.09	14.62	14.52	11.15	12.41
Melton (1990)	12.16	12.63	13.80	14.33	10.49	13.75
Author (1999)	12.54	12.56	14.69	14.42	14.00	10.48

Note: Major style 13.5 or more, Minor style 11.5-13.49, Negative style 11.49 or less (Reid, 1987)

However, an examination of the means by perceptual category revealed only part of the story. The distribution of my students by major, minor, and negative styles among the

6 learning style preferences identified in the PLSPQ showed important variation and complexity, which limited the utility of generalizing too much about the students as a group. In Table 2, students are represented in important numbers in each of 6 perceptual categories as major, minor, and negative styles. For example, even though as a group my students strongly preferred Kinesthetic learning as a major learning style (61.4%), a sizable and important minority (18.7%) identified it as a negative style.

Table 2

Frequencies of Major, Minor, and Negative Learning Style Preferences

Strength of Preference	Preferences by Frequency and Percentage					
	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Group	Individual
Major	53 (31.9%)	58 (34.9%)	102 (61.4%)	96 (57.8%)	86 (51.8%)	28 (16.9%)
Minor	57 (34.3%)	56 (33.7%)	33 (19.9%)	38 (22.9%)	34 (20.5%)	57 (34.3%)
Negative	56 (33.7%)	52 (31.3%)	31 (18.7%)	32 (19.3%)	46 (27.7%)	81 (48.8%)

Note: N=166

Student Expectations about the Course

Also on the first day of class, in each of the 9 sections, I administered an open-ended pre-course survey with two questions. The first question of the pre-course survey was, "What would you like to learn in this class?" The students wrote 5,520 words, of which I identified 267 units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using the constant-comparison method, I grouped the units into 12 major categories describing how the students wanted to improve. Listed below are the descriptions of the categories and the numbers of units counted in each.

- 55: Write academic papers that are acceptable for university professors
- 46: Organize longer papers more logically
- 45: Express ideas more clearly
- 33: Improve diction when writing papers
- 28: Apply English composition skills to some real-life problems

- 20: Sharpen critical thinking skills by learning how to identify strengths and weaknesses in arguments
- 13: Improve knowledge of non-Chinese socio-cultural communities
- 8: Improve use of oral English skills
- 6: Learn how to improve writing independently, without the teacher's steady guidance and direction
- 5: Improve the research skills necessary to write a good academic paper
- 4: Learn about life outside of the classroom, especially in the local community
- 4: Learn how to improve writing by revising papers

As the written remarks about the expectations of the course suggest, many of the students wanted to be taught some basic skills of how to draft formal academic papers. Comments offered by the students resembled this one:

Since I plan to go states for graduate school, so I hope the teacher will show us how to write a good research paper. Then, it will be easier when we learn from our new teachers.

The second pre-course survey question was, "What can I as the instructor do to help you to achieve your goals?" The students wrote a total of 2,244 words, of which I identified 204 units. I then grouped the units into 12 major categories of what the students expected of me as the teacher. Once again, listed below are the categories and the numbers of units counted in each.

- 56: Give clear, specific lectures about steps to be taken to improve papers
- 39: Correct all grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors in papers
- 35: Provide models of good writing to follow for each major assignment

- 25: Inspire students to feel good about coming to class
- 16: Avoid assigning too much homework
- 9: Assign a lot of homework
- 8: Lead in-class discussions to help students brainstorm how to improve writing
- 7: Hold individual conferences with students to give them personal attention
- 4: Use grades as a tool to encourage students to work hard
- 3: Avoid using grades to apply much pressure on students to work hard
- 1: Require students to revise papers multiple times
- 1: Organize peer reviews of papers, so that students can learn from each other

Responses to the second question reflected strong expectations that I should clearly guide students to become more effective academic writers. These sentiments were echoed in the following remarks:

The teacher can tell us clearly what he wants in our papers.

The teacher could give us some excellent examples of good writings, then we could study these and learn the author's styles.

While conducting this action research project, I often reflected upon the data I collected from Reid's (1987) PLSPQ and my open-ended, pre-course surveys for guidance on how to improve my teaching of writing. Means from the PLSPQ indicated that, in general, my students demonstrated a major preference for Kinesthetic, Tactile, and Group learning, a minor preference for Visual and Auditory, and a negative or negligible preference for Individual learning. This information suggested that a composition class which attempted to accommodate their learning styles would include plenty of hands-on, active learning tasks involving group work. This class would also need to present material to them via Visual and Auditory means.

Such matching of learning style preferences with teaching may be one way to accommodate the learning style needs of students (Dunn & Dunn, 1978; Ellis, 1989).

Even though some generalizations may be made about learning style preferences of groups of students, variation in learning styles may often preclude the easy matching of learning styles with instruction. Table 2 shows that important percentages of students were represented in each of the major, minor, and negative style cells for all 6 of the PLSPQ's learning style categories.

Another way to accommodate the learning style needs of students would be to challenge them. They might be taught to *stretch* their learning styles by mastering new learning strategies normally unrelated to their preferred learning styles (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990).

Although some students—as I noted in the Introduction—had complained in person to me at the very beginning of the study about how much they disliked more traditional writing classes, the data systematically collected from 166 students on the pre-course surveys generally reflected a strong desire by many for traditional, product-oriented instructional methods to show them the specific skills associated with drafting academic writing and the various elements of essays and research papers. Teacher directions, error correction, modeling of writing, and leadership of discussion were highly (although not universally) favored. This finding suggested that although Chinese students may have multiple learning styles as Reid, Melton, and this study report, many in my study still preferred teachers to assume a more traditional role. Hence, traditional norms appeared to be an important influence on learning style preferences.

To what extent did the PLSPQ and my pre-course survey reveal truth about student learning styles? One might be tempted to dismiss preferences among students for traditional activities as simply being a reflection of their prior educational experiences, not of their *true* learning style preferences.

While prior learning experiences may have misled some students into preferring ineffective or even counter-productive learning activities, in my view it would be unwise for EFL/ESL educators to miss the important, often positive influences local socio-cultural norms may still have on language learning styles. As reflected in the results of the pre-course surveys, the students appeared to be demanding more of an emphasis on product than process in the teaching of writing. They wanted to be explicitly taught and shown by the teacher the conventions of an academic paper and, what is more, they expected me to provide clear models for them to emulate. Yet their comments on the pre-course surveys did not reflect the naive assumption that a single composition model or a single set of composition criteria would serve in all academic situations. Rather, they were sophisticated consumers of pedagogy. They wanted to learn some basic processes, patterns, and formats that could be transferred after appropriate adjustment to other academic situations with different readers.

Despite the traditional bent, there was also some limited support expressed in the pre-course surveys for innovative pedagogy, another reflection of the complexity in writing classes. As for goals, some expressed a desire to improve their critical thinking skills, their knowledge of non-Chinese socio-cultural communities, and their abilities to work independently of the teacher. As for methods, some hoped that I would lead in-class

discussions to help students brainstorm, hold individual conferences with students to discuss writing, and organize student peer reviews of papers.

Design of the Course

The advanced English writing course at NTHU focused on developing the skills needed to draft formal writing for academic purposes. For this reason, I asked students to write a problem-solving research paper that explored an important social issue affecting Taiwan. Although students were encouraged to write to explore specific topic ideas, to express personal views, and to work in pairs or small groups to critique each other's papers, I also introduced them to models of what I considered to be good essays and research papers, sometimes lecturing to them about paragraph organization, thesis statements, transitions, supporting evidence, text citations, and references.

Nevertheless, I was aware that many of my students, familiar with traditional teaching and learning styles, still needed to develop mulitple learning styles. Likewise, some students apparently disliked traditional teaching and learning styles. To accommodate the complexity of needs, the class included a variety of activities intentionally presented to challenge students to develop their learning styles for writing in as many of the 6 perceptual learning styles as possible.

Visual learning is a learning style generally associated with traditional classroom environments. It often comes through the presentation of the written word. Providing students with models of good writing, written summaries of important lecture materials, outlines on the blackboard of important lecture points, checklists to guide the completion of assignments, worksheets with questions or problems for discussion, and a composition textbook supplemented with handouts all helped to develop this style.

Auditory learning is another style closely tied with traditional classroom activities, such as the lecture. Although I focused on it with occasional lectures about grammar and composition, I also arranged whole-class and small-group discussions of reading assignments, peer reviews of papers in progress, student oral reports of research paper findings, and student-teacher writing conferences.

Next is the Kinesthetic learning style. Although learning by doing and experience is generally not very common in traditional classrooms, I incorporated several kinesthetic activities to complement the more traditional visual and auditory ones. Tasks encouraging students to learn via physical experience included conducting peer reviews of drafts, offering individual conferences with students in my office, taking students on library tours to help them find published evidence for research papers, encouraging students to collect interview and observational data for research papers, switching the location of the class during a discussion to the downstairs lounge or coffee shop, and having students present oral reports of research paper findings at the end of the term. Likewise, I often organized students into workshop groups, in which they prepared a role play of a successful or unsuccessful peer review session, teacher-student writing conference, or information-gathering interview with an outside source for the research paper. Workshop groups were also invited to critique orally for the class model papers or to present short lessons on topics of composition from the textbook or other reference works.

To accommodate Tactile learning style preferences, the students completed several hands-on tasks. These included writing multiple revisions of the research paper, journal entries, and occasional in-class writing assignments. The students also put together a writing portfolio. For the latter task, they presented to me at the end of the semester all

course work, including rough drafts, in a neatly organized, aesthetically pleasing portfolio for final evaluation.

As for the Group learning style preference, relevant tasks included peer reviews of writing, small-group writing workshops, small-group oral presentations to the class on aspects of writing, and small-group brainstorming sessions for topics.

To support the Individual learning style preference, I encouraged students to select and to develop their own specific research paper topics about a social problem affecting Taiwan. I also had them attend individual writing conferences with me. For the few who were especially reluctant to work in groups, I sometimes exempted them from participating in some small-group tasks, giving them the option to work independently. Providing students with clear, written directions of assignments and student models of papers helped to guide them as they worked alone.

Table 3 presents a visual summary of some of the tasks and teaching aids that I often used to address the perceptual learning style preferences identified by Reid's (1987) PLSPQ. I used the summary scheme as a visual reminder of the need to plan tasks that touched as many of the perceptual learning styles as possible.

Table 3

Writing Tasks and Teaching Aids by Perceptual Learning Styles

Tasks & Aids	Styles					
	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Tactile	Group	Individual
Blackboard Writing	√					
Checklists for Papers	√					√
Discussions		√			√	
Exemption from Group Work						√
Handouts	√					
In-class Writings	√			√		√
Individual Oral Reports		√				√
Individual Writing Conferences		√	√			√
Interview Data for Research Paper		√	√			
Journal Writing	√			√		√
Lectures		√				
Library Tours	√	√	√	√	√	
Models of Writing	√					√
Multiple Revisions	√			√		
Peer Reviews	√	√	√	√	√	
Portfolio Development	√			√		
Small-group Oral Reports		√	√		√	
Small-group Workshops	√	√	√	√	√	
Textbook Readings	√					√
Worksheets	√			√		√
Written Summaries of Lessons	√					√

Student Assessments of the Course

At the end of the course I administered to each of the 166 students enrolled in the 9 sections an open-ended survey that asked them to write responses to four questions. The first question of the post-course survey was, "What did you learn about writing in this class?" Listed below are descriptions of the categories and the numbers of units counted in each. The students wrote 2,690 words, of which I identified 194 units of meaning. The units were grouped into 13 major categories.

In general, they reported learning how to draft a formal academic research paper. Some remarks were more specific. How to organize a longer paper, how to collect and

interpret evidence, how to communicate ideas more clearly in writing, and how to use appropriate citations and references were identified as special writing skills learned in class. A few also mentioned that they had learned more about critical thinking and social issues. They reported learning how to:

- 50: Draft a formal research paper
- 31: Organize a longer paper
- 30: Collect and interpret evidence
- 24: Communicate ideas more clearly
- 15: Use appropriate citations and references
- 10: Deliver effective oral presentations
- 10: Care more about social issues
- 9: Improve revision skills
- 5: Think in English more often
- 4: Improve spelling, grammar, punctuation
- 3: Think more critically about issues
- 2: Improve diction
- 1: Learn by talking with classmates

Some examples of replies to the first question are provided below:

I learn how to go through all the difficult process of writing a research paper starting with the proposal and all that.

Organization of the paper.

Use of supporting evidence in writing.

The second question was, "Which activities were most helpful to you?" To this question the students wrote 3,584 words, of which I identified 189 units. From the 189

units emerged 12 major categories. There were relatively strong preferences for teacher-student writing conferences, group discussions, peer reviews, multiple revisions of papers, and models of good papers. They expressed preferences for:

- 35: Teacher-student writing conferences
- 31: Small-group discussions about writing problems
- 24: Peer reviews of papers
- 23: Models of good writing
- 22: Practice in writing a research paper
- 18: Multiple revisions
- 9: Oral presentations of research paper findings
- 9: Teacher correction of grammar errors
- 6: Whole-class discussions of writing problems
- 5: Sentence structure exercises
- 4: Journal writing
- 3: Group workshops on references and citations

Examples of replies to the second question are provided below:

To discuss my problems in my paper with my teacher. Then I know how to improve.

I think the most helpful activity for me is to have a partner discussing hers and my paper. I've learned a lot from reading her paper and helping her to rearrange it, and from listening to her advice to rearrange mine.

The third question was, "Which activities were least helpful?" The students wrote 1,011 words, of which I identified 103 units and 11 major categories. Several students wrote that all of the activities were helpful in one way or another. Nevertheless, there was some dissatisfaction expressed about the focus on writing only one major paper

for the term, about workshops and lectures on the APA references, about sentence structure exercises, and about oral presentations of research paper findings. They expressed dissatisfaction with:

- 33: Nothing, the course should be kept in its current form
- 18: The focus on only one paper for the term
- 12: Workshops and lectures on using APA references
- 9: Sentence structure exercises
- 6: Oral presentations of research paper findings
- 5: Peer reveiws of papers
- 5: Class discussions about writing problems
- 5: Small-group discussions about writing problems
- 5: Writing journals
- 3: The textbook
- 2: In-class writings

Some of the opinions offered by students to this question are presented below:

I think all activities are helpful in some way.

I think, maybe the oral presentation was least helpful because many classmates can't control the time exactly.

The last question was, "What might I have done better to help you to improve?" The students wrote 1,309 words, of which I identified 151 units and 14 categories. Several wrote that no changes should be made in the course. Nevertheless, some expressed a desire to see more assignments, more teacher-student conferences, more lectures, and more detailed, written feedback on compositions. In their views, there needed to be more:

- 35: Of the same, no changes made in the course
- 22: Different kinds of writing assignments
- 20: Teacher-student writing conferences
- 18: Models of good writing
- 15: Peer reviews of papers
- 9: Lectures about composition
- 8: Detailed comments and corrections of papers
- 5: Vocabulary development exercises
- 4: Effort to improve student morale in class
- 4: Opportunities to revise papers
- 4: Suggestions about which reference books to purchase
- 3: In-class discussions of writing problems
- 2: Effort from the teacher to improve his penmanship
- 2: Prewriting activities training

Listed below are some of the replies to this question:

I can't think of others. The help from the teacher is enough for me.

Force us to write more.

Analysis of Student Assessments

The post-course survey results showed that in the eyes of the students, the course was helpful in developing valuable writing skills. Better understanding of the process of writing the research paper, of organizing writing, of collecting and applying evidence in academic papers, and of communicating ideas clearly in writing were often mentioned as tangible, practical benefits for taking the class.

The post-course data also suggested that by the end of the course several non-traditional pedagogical tasks that had not been favored by the students in the pre-course surveys had become popular. Teacher-student writing conferences, small-group discussions about writing topics, peer reviews, and completion of multiple revisions of papers received little if any mention in the pre-course surveys, even though these activities were often mentioned by the students as the most valuable ones in the post-course surveys.

Likewise, the strong support for some traditional activities in the pre-course surveys was missing in the post-course surveys. In the pre-course surveys, the students requested clear lectures about steps to be taken to improve their papers. Although lectures were included in the course, the students did not mention them in the post-course surveys as especially helpful. The same situation also applied to the pre-course survey request that I correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors in papers.

Some of the more traditional pedagogical tasks retained strong support. In both the pre-course and the post-course surveys, the students expressed a strong need for me to provide them with models of appropriate writing to be emulated. Advice and instructions from me were highly favored in both the pre-course and the post-course surveys, yet there was an important change in the preferred means through which to deliver instruction. In the pre-course surveys, the students strongly favored teacher lectures; in the post-course surveys, their support shifted toward teacher-student conferences.

The post-course data also suggested that the course arrangement developed for my students as a response to this action research project appeared to improve their opinions about EFL writing class. I counted 30 units on the pre-course surveys that reflected

irritation about having to take writing, with 8 of these being rather extreme. However, on the post-course surveys there was only 1 such unit. On a related point, students on the post-course surveys wrote that the course should retain its present form in the future. Fifteen wrote that all tasks were beneficial to them and that no changes should be made in the content. This evidence reflecting student satisfaction suggests that teachers who attempt to identify systematically student learning styles and plan classroom tasks accordingly may help their students to adapt to the rigors of a composition class, perhaps even help them to enjoy it.

Conclusion

I discovered classroom-based evidence that it is worthwhile for writing teachers to identify the learning styles and learning preferences of their students to develop activities that will better suit the needs of the local classroom. Although the results of the learning style preference selections of Chinese students in Reid's (1987) study were different in important ways from the results of Melton's (1990) study in three of six perceptual categories, the data from this study more closely paralleled Melton's results, with important differences found in the two perceptual preferences of Group and Individual. (See Table 1.) This suggests that classroom teachers should try to explore systematically the learning style preferences of the students they actually teach.

Moreover, systematically conducting this action research helped me to become a more effective teacher. I learned deeply about the expectations and the needs of my writing students. Through action research, I opened a cooperative, information-gathering dialogue with the students, which helped my research-based teaching to evolve into a more elaborate mosaic of traditional and non-traditional approaches. This is in keeping

with a major goal of action research, which is researching one's own classroom to promote professional growth. Writes McNiff (1988): "For if we as teachers are truly to fulfill our obligations as educators, then we must accept the responsibility of first educating ourselves" (p. 9).

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